

Elizabethtown College

JayScholar

---

Psychology: Student Scholarship & Creative Works

Psychology

---

Spring 2020

## Long-Distance Relationships in the First Year of College

Alexis Trionfo

Elizabethtown College, [trionfoa@etown.edu](mailto:trionfoa@etown.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://jayscholar.etown.edu/psycstu>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Trionfo, Alexis, "Long-Distance Relationships in the First Year of College" (2020). *Psychology: Student Scholarship & Creative Works*. 6.

<https://jayscholar.etown.edu/psycstu/6>

This Student Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology at JayScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology: Student Scholarship & Creative Works by an authorized administrator of JayScholar. For more information, please contact [kralls@etown.edu](mailto:kralls@etown.edu).



## **Honors Senior Thesis Release Agreement Form**

The High Library supports the preservation and dissemination of all papers and projects completed as part of the requirements for the Elizabethtown College Honors Program (Honors Senior Thesis). Your signature on the following form confirms your authorship of this work and your permission for the High Library to make this work available. By agreeing to make it available, you are also agreeing to have this work included in the institutional repository, JayScholar. If you partnered with others in the creation of this work, your signature also confirms that you have obtained their permission to make this work available.

Should any concerns arise regarding making this work available, faculty advisors may contact the Director of the High Library to discuss the available options.

### **Release Agreement**

I, as the author of this work, do hereby grant to Elizabethtown College and the High Library a non-exclusive worldwide license to reproduce and distribute my project, in whole or in part, in all forms of media, including but not limited to electronic media, now or hereafter known, subject to the following terms and conditions:

### **Copyright**

No copyrights are transferred by this agreement, so I, as the author, retain all rights to the work, including but not limited to the right to use in future works (such as articles or books). With this submission, I represent that any third-party content included in the project has been used with permission from the copyright holder(s) or falls within fair use under United States copyright law (<http://www.copyright.gov/title17/92chap1.html#107>).

### **Access and Use**

The work will be preserved and made available for educational purposes only. Signing this document does not endorse or authorize the commercial use of the content. I do not, however, hold Elizabethtown College or the High Library responsible for third party use of this content.

### **Term**

This agreement will remain in effect unless permission is withdrawn by the author via written request to the High Library.

**Signature:** Alexis Trionfo

**Date:** 5/1/20

Long-Distance Relationships in the First Year of College

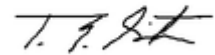
By

Alexis Trionfo

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Discipline in  
Psychology and the Elizabethtown College Honors Program

May 1, 2020

Thesis Director \_\_\_\_\_



Department Chair \_\_\_\_\_



Second Reader \_\_\_\_\_ Elizabeth D. Dalton 5.7.20 \_\_\_\_\_

Third Reader \_\_\_\_\_

[only if applicable such as with interdisciplinary theses]

Long-Distance Relationships in the First Year of College

Alexis Trionfo

Elizabethtown College

## Abstract

Previous research highlights long-distance relationships' negative impact on academic adjustment, social life, and personal-emotional well-being for individuals in college. This study examined the impact of long-distance relationships on college adjustment, specifically in the first year of college. The concept of societal location—whether one's partner also attended a traditional 4-year institution or not—and its impacts on college adjustment and relationship satisfaction were also investigated. Through an online survey sent to first-year students, 77 participants completed the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire. Of these participants, 33 were in a long-distance relationship and completed the Couples Satisfaction Index. During Time I, the hypothesized negative effects of long-distance relationships on college adjustment were not supported ( $p = .49$ ). Partners' societal location also had no significant effect on college adjustment or relationship satisfaction ( $p = .40$ ). During Time II, relationship type had a significant effect on college adjustment ( $p = .01$ ). The hypothesized negative effects of staying together with long-distance partners were not supported ( $p = .20$ ). With the current sample, relationship satisfaction significantly decreased from the fall semester to the spring semester for individuals who remained in their long-distance relationships ( $p = .01$ ). As there is no research on societal location, this factor should be further examined in additional studies. The primary limitation of this study involved the short time frame and the sample's homogeneity. Additional results and conclusions are discussed.

*Keywords:* long-distance, relationship, college adjustment

### Long-Distance Relationships in the First Year of College

For many emerging adults, a traditional 4-year college is the first time one experiences life away from home. Enrolling in college has increasingly become the norm, as are the steps that come with it: social supports, new environments, academics, career exploration, and romantic relationships (Roberson, Fish, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2015). With all of these transitions, not everything has to be different. With new forms of technology becoming more prevalent, it has become easier to maintain long-distance relationships. About 25-50% of college students are in a long-distance romantic relationship and 75% have experienced one at some point in their college experience (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Multiple studies have examined the relationship between aspects of college adjustment and long-distance relationships. This study will delve deeper by examining factors that predict relationship satisfaction and examining other relationship characteristics. In doing so, the results of this study will bridge the connection between long-distance relationships and college adjustment as a whole, expanding upon the current knowledge. While examining these factors, this study will also be determining if there are differences between long-distance couples who both go to traditional 4-year institutions versus long-distance couples in which one partner goes to a traditional 4-year institution and the other stays at home (community college, entering the workforce, etc.), which we define for this study as “societal location.”

### **College Adjustment**

College adjustment is typically broken down into four main categories in research: academic performance (Maguire & Kinney, 2010; Thurber & Walton, 2012), involvement in campus activities or clubs (Firmin, Firmin, & Lorenzen, 2014; Waterman, Wesche, Leavitt, Jones, & Lefkowitz, 2017), social life (English, Davis, Wei, & Gross, 2017), and psychological

well-being (Maguire & Kinney, 2010; Roberson et al., 2015; Whitton, Weitbrecht, Kuryluk, & Bruner, 2013). College adjustment is most successful when there is a balance between these four attributes of college, and long-distance relationships can affect each one.

Long-distance relationships have been shown to negatively impact academic performance (Maguire & Kinney, 2010), as well as the perceived level of academic difficulty (English et al., 2017). Focusing on maintaining a romantic relationship at home could impede studies and other dedications to classwork. Homesickness is a ruminative aspect of the first year of one's college experience, typically brought on by instances of loneliness (Firmin et al., 2014). It has been found to interfere with focus (Thurber & Walton, 2012), concentration abilities (Burt, 1993), and attentional demands (English et al., 2017), genuinely reducing academic abilities in some cases. If students become homesick for their friends, family, or romantic partner while away from home, tasks they would typically be able to handle become much more difficult due to the distress and impairment of the separation (Thurber & Walton, 2012). In some instances, homesickness can be so severe that it can lead to withdrawal from college altogether.

When one's partner is not around, there are a few methods to curbing homesickness and loneliness. One of the most impactful methods studied was campus involvement (Firmin et al., 2014). One student said, "When I'm busy, I experience [loneliness] less. It helps to stay busy, because then I don't have a lot of time to think about it," (p. 65). Attention spent on activities that take time, require commitment, and offer joy to students allow them to put their focus on something other than not having their partner at their side. Students in long-distance relationships, however, are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities than their single peers, which may explain why their loneliness levels are higher than single students, despite being in relationships (Waterman et al., 2017). Loneliness peaked in female students after seeing

their partners, around holidays, when their friends went on dates, on “bad” or “lull” days, and after seeing other couples on campus (Firmin et al., 2014). Campus involvement could fit in many of the gaps experienced by college students, curbing their feelings of loneliness and improving their college adjustment.

Similar to academic adjustment and activity involvement, social adjustment is a significant predictor of a successful college experience. Students ruminating on what they left behind at home may have difficulty adjusting to the social setting of college (English et al., 2017). Difficulty fitting in is associated with fewer interactions with peers, causing students to be more likely to reach out to their relationships at home. Students dealing with difficulty adjusting to the social setting of college end up strengthening their bonds from home; this can interfere with the development of new relationships at their college. Through this cycle, satisfaction with social life decreases, feelings of loneliness increase as college relationships worsen (or do not form at all), and relationships with people outside of college improve.

There is mixed data on the impact of long-distance relationships in college on psychological well-being. Well-being includes the avoidance of “risky behavior,” such as alcohol or drug use/abuse, and managing mental health, such as anxiety or depression. Some research states involvement in a committed relationship while in college is associated with less alcohol use for both partners (Whitton et al., 2013), while more recent studies show there are no significant differences in alcohol use based on relationship status (Waterman et al., 2017). There are mixed results on depression as well; one study states involvement in a committed relationship while in college was associated with fewer depressive symptoms for women (Whitton et al., 2013), while others state involvement in a romantic relationship during the first year of college has been shown to increase depressive symptoms for men and women (Roberson et al., 2015).



While research points toward psychological distress being heightened in college men and women in long-distance relationships, overall research is not conclusive (Maguire & Kinney, 2010).

### **Relationship Satisfaction in Long-Distance Relationships**

When thinking of what makes long-distance relationships difficult, lack of face-to-face contact is typically what comes to mind first. It should be noted, however, that distance is not a factor in relationship satisfaction in non-romantic relationships (Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008). Proximity has been shown to be an unessential variable for relationship satisfaction, suggesting the quality of communication bears much more weight (Firmin et al., 2014). While the results on what impacts the quality of communication and how time spent together impacts proximal romantic relationships versus long-distance romantic relationships is not as concrete, the results on what can lead to higher or lower levels of relationship satisfaction are consistent.

Relationship satisfaction is closely related to relationship security, which is defined as “the sense of trust and faith one has in one's partner and relationship” (Cameron & Ross, 2007, p. 582). While this is necessary in both proximal and long-distance romantic relationships, having it in long-distance relationships will lead the couple to be more likely to actively work to maintain the relationship and less likely to break up due to distance. Achieving relationship security involves motivation, intent, equity, and constant effort, creating greater levels of intimacy than proximal couples (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). A couple in a long-distance relationship will feel stronger levels of commitment and appreciation for the “little things,” since they know the little things require a lot of work (Firmin et al., 2014). Frequent visits have been shown to be an effective way to help build trust and faith in long-distance relationships and are a powerful driver of relationship satisfaction (Maguire & Kinney, 2010).

While there may be strong feelings of commitment and cherishment within a relationship, the feelings of uncertainty in regard to the future can combat them (Firmin et al., 2014). Those in long-distance romantic relationships described an increased level of uncertainty in their relationships, due to factors such as doubts of likelihood of reunion or threats of relationship maintenance, than if they were proximal ones (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). Uncertainty of equity was also a factor in relationship dissatisfaction. Equity, or equal commitment to the relationship, is determined by the individual comparing the costs of the relationship (how much am I putting in?) to the rewards of the relationship (how much am I receiving back?). If the equity seems unfair in their partner's favor—such as lack of response in messages, lack of visits going one way, etc.—relationship dissatisfaction rises (Johnson et al., 2008). Despite satisfaction that one might feel when with their partner proximally, the dissatisfaction caused by uncertainty or lack of balance may outweigh those feelings when apart.

### **Other Characteristics of Long-Distance Relationships**

When an individual enters college, he or she will have many challenges related to his or her college adjustment. If the individual enters college while in a long-distance relationship, additional layers are added. While some results indicate those in long-distance relationships might have equal or stronger senses of stability, satisfaction, and trust as those in proximal relationships (Jiang & Hancock, 2013), others indicate challenges have the possibility to become amplified when in a long-distance relationship as opposed to a proximal one. In a study conducted on long-distance romantic relationships among college students, 41.5% of participants reported distance ended or worsened their relationships (Knox, Zusman, Daniels, & Brantley, 2002). Even if distance was not harmful to relationships, the stigma that long-distance relationships are less stable has been shown to increase perceived insecurity (Cameron & Ross,

2007). Stigmas of long-distance relationships are just one of the stressors faced. Challenges of long-distance relationships, both anticipated and experienced, have been found to be classified into three main sections in research: external stressors (Maguire & Kinney, 2010; Rusu, Hilpert, Falconier, & Bodenmann, 2017), time allotment (Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Waterman et al., 2017), and energy/effort (Knox et al., 2002; Maguire & Kinney, 2010).

External stressors are challenges to the relationship that are not necessarily sourced from the relationship. For example, if a member of one's social support group does not approve of the relationship or the long-distance component of it, this puts the individual at a crossroads between their relationship and their social group (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). Another challenge to both the individual and the relationship would be economic strain. Traveling to see one another brings on expenses that are typically hard to deal with as college students. When faced with economic strain, couples are found to feel reduced positive emotions and support for one another (Rusu et al., 2017). Despite not being directly caused by either partner, external stressors can have a large impact on how partners feel about each other.

Allocating the limited time first-year college students have is difficult already, between academics, activities, and social bonding. Those going into college with long-distance relationships may experience strain in their relationships, having to choose between their relationship or college commitments (Waterman et al., 2017). This struggle may lead to additional time spent communicating with their partners, attempting to coordinate plans. Synchronicity, the degree to which communication occurs in real-time, can become an additional stressor (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Attempting to schedule and coordinate times to talk or see each other can become taxing for an already busy first-year student. Not being able to connect in real-time or provide support needed can become frustrating and a misuse of both partners' time.

Couples in long-distance relationships must work together to keep the relationship working, otherwise it will be viewed as unfair or unbalanced (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). If it is perceived that one partner is putting in more effort than the other partner, motivation, commitment, and trust may all be negatively affected. People who had been in a long-distance romantic relationship were 8.1% more likely to believe “out of sight, out of mind” than those who had only been in proximal relationships (Knox et al., 2002). Without effort to maintain the relationship, the belief that someone could stop thinking about their partner due to lack of seeing them could come to fruition, causing relationship stress.

### **Partner’s Societal Location**

While it was once reported only half of emerging adults went away to college (Kovess-Masfety et al., 2016), the current statistics claim almost 70% of high school graduates enroll in college the following semester (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Despite studying long-distance relationships for first-years in college, this does not guarantee their partner is a traditional or residential college student as well. While the differences in the prevalence of psychological disorders between college-attending emerging adults and non-college-attending emerging adults is undetermined, non-college attending individuals have a significantly smaller social environment, more negative self-image, and lower self-esteem than their college-attending peers (Blanco et al., 2008). Studying a partner’s societal location could explain the benefits or disadvantages of experiencing new locations when in an established relationship. It could be possible that the documented higher negative self-image and lower self-esteem among non-college attending peers could adversely affect their relationships with traditional college students. Statistics show there is a peak of relationship break-ups during the months of the first

semester of college (McCandless & Byron, 2010); the experience of one or two partners facing new environments could explain this trend.

### **Time I**

This study will compare the college adjustment of those in long-distance romantic relationships in the first year of college with those not in long-distance romantic relationships. The existing research on individual aspects of college adjustment is rich, but there is limited research examining college adjustment in terms of academic performance, campus involvement, social life, and psychological well-being in one study. These factors examined together will create a more holistic view of how well first-year students in long-distance romantic relationships adjust to college, as opposed to previous studies examining individual aspects of adjustment. There is also little to no research on the differences between long-distance relationship partners with the same societal location versus partners with different societal locations. This study will examine factors of long-distance relationships, such as societal location, relationship satisfaction, and other relationship characteristics, in connection to college adjustment. The current research prompted the formation of three hypotheses:

1. Students in long-distance relationships in the first year of college will have lower college adjustment scores based on academic performance, campus involvement, social life, and psychological well-being compared to students not in long-distance relationships in the first year of college.
2. Students in long-distance relationships with different societal locations than their partners during the first year of college will have lower college adjustment scores based on academic performance, campus involvement, social life, and psychological

well-being compared to students in long-distance relationships with the same societal location as their partner during the first year of college.

3. Students in long-distance relationships with different societal locations than their partners during the first year of college will have lower relationship satisfaction scores compared to students in long-distance relationships with the same societal location as their partner during the first year of college.

## **Time II**

To further understand the impact of long-distance relationships on college adjustment and relationship satisfaction, this follow-up data collection in the spring semester will continue to compare participants from the first round of data collection in the fall semester. Multiple aspects of college adjustment were again measured—academic performance, social life, psychological well-being—as was campus attachment. This study will continue to examine relationship satisfaction in connection to college adjustment. The second round of research prompted the formation of three hypotheses:

1. Students in long-distance relationships in the first year of college will have lower college adjustment scores based on academic performance, social life, psychological well-being, and campus attachment compared to students in proximal relationships in the first year of college and compared to students not in a relationship in the first year of college.
2. Students whose long-distance relationships ended will have higher college adjustment scores based on academic performance, social life, psychological well-being, and campus attachment compared to students who were in long-distance relationships in

- the fall of their first year of college and are still with their long-distance partner in the spring of their first year of college.
3. Students who are in long-distance relationships in the fall of their first year of college and are still with their long-distance partner in the spring of their first year of college will have lower relationship satisfaction scores in the spring semester than they did in the fall semester.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through a survey link sent to all first-year students at Elizabethtown College in the fall semester. A convenience sample of 77 first-year students that responded were eligible to participate, establishing a response rate of 24.0%. Participants both in long-distance relationships and not in long-distance relationships were eligible to participate, with 42.8% of participants in a long-distance relationship in the fall semester. The ages ranged from 18 to 20 years old. Due to the nature of the demographic breakdown of Elizabethtown College, the sample was predominantly White (88.3%) and female (80.5%).

Participants received 30 minutes of research participation credit if they identified as being enrolled in a participating psychology course. Those not in a participating psychology class did not receive compensation. Twelve participants who began the survey did not meet the inclusion criteria and were not counted in the results. Participants were asked to provide their email addresses to be contacted again in the spring semester and asked to complete the survey a second time. Participants were asked to provide their campus mailbox numbers if they were Elizabethtown College students, to be given credit slips for any classes.

In the spring semester, a follow-up online survey was distributed to the 77 students who completed the survey in the fall semester. A total of 52 students responded and were eligible to participate, establishing a response rate of 67.5%. Participants were recruited through a survey link sent to the email addresses they provided in the first survey. In the spring semester, 46.2% of participants were not in a relationship, 36.5% were in a long-distance relationship with the same person they were in a relationship with in the fall semester, 13.5% were in a proximal relationship that began in the spring semester, and 3.8% were in a long-distance relationship that began in the spring semester. Those in relationships were predominantly in straight relationships (92.8%). Due to the nature of the demographic breakdown of Elizabethtown College, the sample was predominantly White (92.3%) and female (78.8%).

Participants received 30 minutes of research participation credited if they identified as being enrolled in a participating psychology course. Participants also received a chance to be randomly selected to win a \$25 Amazon gift card if they provided their email address, which was used to pair their answers from the fall semester. Two participants who began the survey did not meet the inclusion criteria and were not counted in the results. Participants were asked to provide their campus mailbox numbers if they were Elizabethtown College students, to be given credit slips for any classes.

## **Materials**

**College adjustment.** Adjustment to college was measured with the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ; Baker & Siryk, 1984). There are 67 nine-point Likert-scale questions that make up four subscales: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional, and attachment. For the purposes of Time I, totaling 59 questions. For the purposes of Time II, all four subscales were used, as sufficient time to measure campus attachment had



transpired. Cronbach's alpha indicated excellent reliability for the scale ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and good reliability for the academic adjustment subscale ( $\alpha = .86$ ), the social adjustment subscale ( $\alpha = .87$ ), the personal-emotional adjustment subscale ( $\alpha = .82$ ), and the attachment subscale ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Relationship satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction was measured with the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007), which consists of 31 six-point Likert-scale questions along with one 7-point-scale question. For the purposes of this study, the 16-item version was used. Examples of prompts include "My partner and I agree on the amount of time we should spend together," and "I really feel like part of a team with my partner." The scale is measured through adding points, with higher scores indicating higher relationship satisfaction. Cronbach's alpha indicated excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

**Other characteristics of long-distance relationships.** Other characteristics of long-distance relationships were measured with questions such as "About how many cumulative hours a day do you communicate with your partner?," "Do you believe your family approves of your partner?," "Does your family's approval matter to you?," "Do you believe your friends approve of your partner?," "Does your friends' approval matter to you?," "Is your partner currently enrolled in a traditional 4-year college?," and "How long have you and your partner been together?" These questions were developed specifically for the current study.

**Demographic information.** If individuals described themselves as in a romantic relationship, then they were considered in a relationship. For a relationship to be considered long-distance in this study, partners had to be separated by 25 or more miles. Demographic information on age, gender, and race/ethnicity were also collected.

## **Procedure**

Participants completed an online survey. The survey began with an informed consent page, followed by items from the SACQ. If the participant was in a long-distance relationship at the time of participating in the fall semester, the individual completed items from the CSI and the “Other characteristics of long-distance relationships” section. If the participants was in a proximal or long-distance relationship at the time of participating in the spring semester, the individual completed items from the CSI and the “Other characteristics of long-distance relationships” section. All participants then completed the “Demographic information” section. Identifying information, such as email address and Elizabethtown College campus mailbox number, were collected at this time, ending the survey.

### **Data Analysis**

For Time I, descriptive statistics were calculated for all study variables. The first hypothesis was assessed using an independent groups *t*-test. Both the second and third hypotheses were assessed using a between-groups MANOVA.

For Time II, descriptive statistics were calculated for all study variables. The first hypothesis was assessed using a between-groups MANOVA. The second hypothesis was assessed using an independent groups *t*-test. The third hypothesis was assessed using a paired groups *t*-test.

## **Results**

### **Time I**

For full descriptive data, see Table 1. An independent samples *t*-test revealed no significant difference [ $t(75) = -0.69, p = .49, d = 0.16$ ] in college adjustment between those in a long-distance romantic relationship ( $M = 369.73, SD = 69.14$ ) and those not in a long-distance romantic relationship ( $M = 360.36, SD = 50.52$ ). A one-way MANOVA revealed no significant

multivariate main effect for long-distance couples' societal locations on college adjustment or relationship satisfaction scores [Wilks's  $\lambda = .941$ ,  $F(2, 30) = 0.94$ ,  $p = .40$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ ].

Post hoc regression analyses were conducted to predict relationship satisfaction and college adjustment in the domains of the three subscales of college adjustment. The regression model, examining hours in a day talking with their partner, family approval, friend approval, societal location, relationship length, and scores on each subscale of the SACQ, was able to account for 62.6% of the variance in CSI scores. Friends approval of the participants' relationship was a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction ( $b = 8.27$ ,  $p = .01$ ). A 1-unit increase in friend approval was associated with an 8.27 increase in relationship satisfaction. The regression model was able to account for 53.9% of the variance in personal-emotional adjustment to college. Family approval of the participants' relationship was a significant predictor of the participants' personal-emotional adjustment to college ( $b = 13.45$ ,  $p = .01$ ). A 1-unit increase in family approval was associated with a 13.45 increase in personal-emotional well-being. There were no other significant predictors of relationship satisfaction or aspects of college adjustment. See Tables 2-5 for full regression analyses.

## Time II

A one-way MANOVA revealed a significant main effect for types of relationships in the first year of college on college adjustment based on academic performance, social life, psychological well-being, and campus attachment [Wilks's  $\lambda = .520$ ,  $F(3, 48) = 2.17$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .20$ ]. Univariate tests revealed a significant difference in social adjustment [ $F(3, 48) = 3.10$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .16$ ] and in campus attachment [ $F(3, 48) = 8.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .35$ ] based on current relationship status. Using Bonferroni's post hoc test, individuals who entered newly formed long-distance relationships ( $M = 69.50$ ,  $SD = 37.48$ ) had significantly lower social adjustment

than individuals not in a relationship ( $M = 126.87$ ,  $SD = 29.16$ ;  $p = .05$ ), individuals in a proximal relationship ( $M = 136.43$ ,  $SD = 23.91$ ;  $p = .03$ ), and individuals in the same long-distance relationship from the fall semester ( $M = 128.95$ ,  $SD = 27.24$ ;  $p = .04$ ). There were no significant differences in social adjustment between any other current relationship statuses.

Using Bonferroni's post hoc test, it was also revealed that individuals who entered newly formed long-distance relationships ( $M = 20.50$ ,  $SD = 9.19$ ) had significantly lower campus attachment than individuals not in a relationship ( $M = 50.04$ ,  $SD = 7.63$ ;  $p < .001$ ), individuals in a proximal relationship ( $M = 53.14$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and individuals in the same long-distance relationship from the fall semester ( $M = 50.21$ ,  $SD = 10.02$ ;  $p < .001$ ). There were no significant differences in campus attachment between any other current relationship statuses.

An independent samples  $t$ -test revealed no significant difference [ $t(24) = 1.32$ ,  $p = .20$ ,  $d = 0.56$ ] in college adjustment between those who were broken up from their long-distance relationship partner ( $M = 439.25$ ,  $SD = 57.22$ ) and those who stayed together with their long-distance relationship partner ( $M = 402.33$ ,  $SD = 69.32$ ). For descriptive data, see Table 6.

A paired samples  $t$ -test revealed a significant decline [ $t(17) = 2.78$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = 0.66$ ] in relationship satisfaction for individuals in their long-distance relationships in the fall semester ( $M = 80.11$ ,  $SD = 6.15$ ) and the same individuals in their long-distance relationships in the spring semester ( $M = 72.33$ ,  $SD = 13.35$ ).

## Discussion

### College Adjustment

The first hypothesis of Time I regarding lower college adjustment for those in long-distance romantic relationships compared to those not in long-distance romantic relationships was not supported by the current sample. This is not consistent with previous findings, but this

could be because the survey was taken so early in the academic year for first-years. First-years who took this survey in late August through early October may still be in a “honeymoon” phase with their partner. When relationships enter new phases (such as going from dating to marriage or becoming long-distance for the first time), the honeymoon phase can begin again, even if the relationship is not a new one (Reese-Weber, 2015). With long-distance being a new factor in relationships, many can feel differently toward their relationships. When thinking of college adjustment for these first-years, their long-distance relationships might not be playing a role in their adjustment yet, either because of this new phase or environment, making any differences too small in comparison to be detected.

The second hypothesis of Time I regarding lower college adjustment for those in long-distance relationships with differing societal locations compared to those in long-distance relationships with the same societal location was not supported by the current sample. Research states non-college attending individuals have significantly smaller social circles and more negative self-image and self-esteem than their college-attending peers (Blanco et al., 2008). Self-esteem is not shown to be as impactful on relationship satisfaction as other aspects of personal-emotional wellbeing, such as neuroticism, experienced in one partner (Weidmann, Ledermann, & Grob, 2017). Based on these findings, it was expected there would be more difficulty in college adjustment where one partner was not attending a traditional 4-year institution, as there could be a possibility for the dedication of time and energy to supporting their partner, but this study did not support this. Another factor, such as relationship length or hours spent talking per day, could be impactful in balancing any potential negative effects of relationship types or societal location.

The first hypothesis of Time II regarding college adjustment by relationship type (previously established long-distance, newly established long-distance, proximal, and none) was supported by the current sample. The group most negatively impacted in social adjustment and college attachment adjustment was individuals who had entered a new long-distance relationship in the spring semester, compared to all other groups of relationship types. This study lines up with the current findings on long-distance relationships impacting college adjustment, especially when there is no support of relationship length to back the relationship up with (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). It could be possible that already established long-distance relationships (having been together anywhere from 5 months to around 6 years) do not negatively impact college adjustment in the way newly established long-distance relationships (averaging a relationship length of about one month) do. Individuals who newly entered long-distance relationships could be too dedicated to developing their new relationship to strengthen their proximal social ties, leaving them feeling distant and not connected to their college. Conversely, first-years who do not feel connected or attached to their campus could also be more likely to seek out a relationship distant from their college. It is important to note, overall, different relationship types have the ability to impact individuals' college adjustment, specifically in areas of social adjustment and campus attachment.

The second hypothesis of Time II regarding college adjustment of long-distance couples that broke up versus long-distance couples that stayed together was not supported by the current sample. College adjustment was, on average, higher across all subscales and totals for individuals who had broken up their long-distance relationship than those who were still with their partner, however, these differences in scores were not enough to cross the threshold for significance.

**Relationship Satisfaction in Long-Distance Relationships**

The third hypothesis of Time I regarding lower relationship satisfaction for those in long-distance relationships with differing societal locations compared to those in long-distance relationships with the same societal location was not supported by the current sample. Those answering the relationship satisfaction questions may want to paint their relationship in a better light than they feel it is currently in, which could explain the answers clustered toward the ceiling of the CSI scale. The cognitive dissonance or social desirability they might experience regarding how they view their relationship versus how it actually feels might make them feel too uncomfortable to answer truthfully, (e.g., “Why would I be in this relationship if I am not happy with how it is going?”, “Other people might not understand my relationship the way that I do, so I feel pressured to say it’s better than it is.”). It could be just as likely the case the current sample of people were truly happy in their relationships.

Family approval was found to impact relationship satisfaction. Research findings have shown importance of the social approval of a student’s relationship, as well as a want for approval on the long-distance component (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). If a family member does not approve of the student’s long-distance relationship, individuals can convince themselves that their loved one is correct or seeing something that they are not able to. Humans tend to crave their loved ones’ approval, adapting their own expectations and approvals of their partners to their family members’ expectations (Plamondon & Lachance, 2018). This applies to friend approval as well. When friends do not approve of a relationship, this puts the individual at a crossroad between their relationship and their social circle, creating great amounts of stress (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). With the amount of stress first-year students already experience, this can increase the difficulty of their adjustment to college and their view of their relationship.

The third hypothesis of Time II regarding relationship satisfaction of individuals in long-distance relationships from the fall semester to spring semester was supported by the current sample. This is consistent with the research literature. Long-distance relationships have been shown to have significantly lower relationship satisfaction scores compared to proximal relationships, aligning with the current sample's decrease in satisfaction over time (Maguire & Kinney, 2010; Jiang & Hancock, 2013). As mentioned previously, distance is a common reported factor in relationships worsening or ending (Knox, Zusman, Daniels, & Brantley, 2002). This lines up with the discussed honeymoon phase of the first semester (Reese-Weber, 2015). With the challenges of regular visits and consistent communication now presented in the second semester, relationship satisfaction may now level out, erasing any possible honeymoon phase present earlier in the semester. It is important to note, overall, long-distance romantic relationships produce lower relationship satisfaction scores as individuals advance further into their college experience.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study is the self-report nature of the survey. When using a scale like the CSI, the data is quantitative, as opposed to qualitative. If this study was conducted in an open-ended format, such as in an interview setting, there could be more to gather. Cues on how each person's relationship was going would be within each participant's tone of voice, pauses, facial expressions, body language, and content of answers. Another limitation would be participants being aware of what this study was attempting to gather. If participants thought their relationship satisfaction was going to be related to their adjustment to college, they might not be entirely truthful in their answers, once again due to cognitive dissonance or social pressures.



The analysis could benefit from a larger sample size. Of the 77 eligible responses, 33 were in a long-distance relationship. Since many of the analyses examined the satisfaction in long-distance relationships, and then the breakdown of same societal locations (17 participants) versus different societal locations (16 participants), more participants who met these criteria would help strengthen the results. This also applied in the second period of data collection. Of the 52 eligible responses, 22 were in a long-distance relationship. With these analyses focusing on the impact of long-distance relationships breaking up (eight participants) versus staying together (18 participants), a larger sample size would help even out the data. More representation would have been beneficial in multiple areas. With the majority of the sample being White, female, and in straight relationships we have no ability to apply these results accurately to other races, ethnicities, genders, or sexualities.

### **Recommendations**

As there is no research on societal location, this is an important subject that should be further examined in additional studies. More research on various areas that societal location can impact college students can be telling—this can apply to more than just first-year students, as well. While there were no differences found in the current study, navigating different societal locations may strain college adjustment or relationship satisfaction in other ways that should be identified. It could be interesting to see how societal location impacts each class year or couples who are in different class years, possibly in a longitudinal study. As mentioned in the limitations, this could be gathered in the form of a combination of survey and interview formats, to gather more information and emotions on the relationship satisfaction.

Given the current sample's lack of representation, all results could benefit from replication with a more diverse sample. With a predominantly White and female sample, these

results might not necessarily apply to different races/ethnicities/cultures or genders. Future research should replicate this study with a sample featuring other institutions, to broaden the applicability. Larger institutions, institutions where there is more variability in who lives on or off campus, historically Black colleges or universities, institutions where the gender distribution is more even, and institutions in urban or suburban areas, should all be considered for future research.

The results of the current study could be beneficial in student affairs/higher education work. If the results show that family and friend approval of long-distance relationships impact a student's adjustment to college in any way, this could help directors of student affairs programs have the right resources, such as counseling services, ready to support first-year students who may be facing this adjustment for the first time, may be grappling with lack of approval from family or friends regarding their relationship, or may be feeling disconnected from the campus. Especially when looking into individuals entering a newly established long-distance relationship, social adjustment levels and campus attachment levels are dramatically lower than their peers. Event programming can focus on emphasizing social and campus relationships in the second semester, around the time that individuals begin to change their relationship type. Due to the small amount of individuals entering new long-distance relationships, this impact should be studied further.

Regarding family approval, I think the results of the regression analyses can be informative for parents of children in long-distance relationships. If the disapproval of a relationship can impact their children's personal-emotional well-being so deeply, it is imperative for parents to be an open-minded support system. This research also opens the door for future studies in societal location. As almost half of the participants in long-distance relationships had a

different societal location than their partner, the current study demonstrates that this is a subject prominent enough to study.

## References

- Baker, R. W., & Siryk, B. (1984). Measuring adjustment to college. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 31*, 179-189. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.31.2.179>
- Blanco, C., Okuda, M., Wright, C., Hasin, D. S., Grant, B. F., Liu, S.-M., & Olfson, M. (2008). Mental health of college students and their non-college-attending peers: Results from the National Epidemiologic Study on Alcohol and Related Conditions. *Archives of General Psychiatry, 65*, 1429-1437. <http://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.65.12.1429>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2017). 69.7 percent of 2016 high school graduates enrolled in college in October 2016. *The Economics Daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/mobile/69-point-7-percent-of-2016-high-school-graduates-enrolled-in-college-in-october-2016.htm>
- Burt, C. D. B. (1993). Concentration and academic ability following transition to university: An investigation of the effects of homesickness. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 13*, 333-342. [http://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(05\)80255-5](http://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(05)80255-5)
- Cameron, J. J., & Ross, M. (2007). In times of uncertainty: Predicting the survival of long-distance relationships. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 147*, 581-606. <http://doi.org/10.3200/SOCP.147.6.581-606>
- English, T., Davis, J., Wei, M., & Gross, J. J. (2017). Homesickness and adjustment across the first year of college: A longitudinal study. *Emotion, 17*, 1-5. <http://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000235>
- Firmin, M. W., Firmin, R. L., & Lorenzen, K. (2014). A qualitative analysis of loneliness dynamics involved with college long-distance relationships. *College Student Journal, 48*, 57-71. Retrieved from <http://www.projectinnovation.com/college-student-journal.html>

- Funk, J. L., & Rogge, R. D. (2007). Testing the ruler with item response theory: Increasing precision of measurement for relationship satisfaction with the Couples Satisfaction Index. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21, 572–583. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.21.4.572>
- Jiang, L. C., & Hancock, J. T. (2013). Absence makes the communication grow fonder: Geographic separation, interpersonal media, and intimacy in dating relationships. *Journal of Communication*, 63, 556–577. <http://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12029>
- Johnson, A. J., Haigh, M. M., Becker, J. A. H., Craig, E. A., & Wigley, S. (2008). College students' use of relational management strategies in email in long-distance and geographically close relationships. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 381–404. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2008.00401.x>
- Knox, D., Zusman, M. E., Daniels, V., & Brantley, A. (2002). Absence makes the heart grow fonder? Long distance dating relationships among college students. *College Student Journal*, 36, 364–366. Retrieved from <http://www.projectinnovation.com/college-student-journal.html>
- Kovess-Masfety, V., Leray, E., Denis, L., Husky, M., Pitrou, I., & Bodeau-Livinec, F. (2016). Mental health of college students and their non-college-attending peers: Results from a large French cross-sectional survey. *BMC Psychology*, 4(20), 1-9. <http://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-016-0124-5>
- Maguire, K. C., & Kinney, T. A. (2010). When distance is problematic: Communication, coping, and relational satisfaction in female college students' long-distance dating

- relationships. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 38, 27–46.  
<http://doi.org/10.1080/00909880903483573>
- McCandless, D. & Byron, L. (2010). Peak break-up times on Facebook. *Information is Beautiful*. Retrieved from <http://informationisbeautiful.net/2010/peak-break-up-times-on-facebook/>
- Plamondon, A., & Lachance, G. M. (2018). What if they are right? Network approval, expectations, and relationship maintenance behaviors. *Personal Relationships*, 25, 190–204. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12236>
- Reese-Weber, M. (2015). Intimacy, communication, and aggressive behaviors: Variations by phases of romantic relationship development. *Personal Relationships*, 22, 204–215.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12074>
- Roberson, P. N. E., Fish, J. N., Olmstead, S. B., & Fincham, F. D. (2015). College adjustment, relationship satisfaction, and conflict management: A cross-lag assessment of developmental “spillover.” *Emerging Adulthood*, 3, 244–254.  
<http://doi.org/10.1177/2167696815570710>
- Rusu, P. P., Hilpert, P., Falconier, M., & Bodenmann, G. (2017). Economic strain and support in couple: The mediating role of positive emotions. *Stress and Health: Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress*, 34, 320–330.  
<http://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2794>
- Thurber, C. A. & Walton, E. A. (2012). Homesickness and adjustment in university students. *Journal of American College Health*, 60, 415–419. <http://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2012.673520>

- Waterman, E. A., Wesche, R., Leavitt, C. E., Jones, D. E., & Lefkowitz, E. S. (2017). Long-distance dating relationships, relationship dissolution, and college adjustment. *Emerging Adulthood, 5*, 268–279. <http://doi.org/10.1177/2167696817704118>
- Weidmann, R., Ledermann, T., & Grob, A. (2017). Big Five traits and relationship satisfaction: The mediating role of self-esteem. *Journal of Research in Personality, 69*, 102–109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2016.06.001>
- Whitton, S. W., Weitbrecht, E. M., Kuryluk, M. S., & Bruner, M. R. (2013). Committed dating relationships and mental health among college students. *Journal of American College Health, 61*, 176-183. <http://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2013.773903>

Table 1

*Average Scores of College Adjustment and Relationship Satisfaction for Those in and Not in Long-Distance Relationships (LDRs) in the First Year of College.*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Percentile		Skewness	<i>n</i>
					25 <sup>th</sup>	75 <sup>th</sup>		
College Adjustment	364.38	376.00	58.98	333	334	403	-1.18	77
In LDR	369.73	383.00	69.14	333	349	413	-1.70	33
Not in LDR	360.36	366.50	50.52	213	326	390	-0.42	44



Table 2

*Regression Analysis Predicting Couples Satisfaction Index Scores Among a Sample of First-Year College Students in a Long-Distance Relationship (n = 33).*

<b>Variable</b>	<b><i>b</i></b>	<b><i>SE</i></b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b><i>t</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Hours Talking with Partner in a Day	0.54	0.48	0.21	1.13	.27
Family Approval	-2.29	2.75	-0.19	-0.83	.41
Friends Approval	8.27	2.96	0.58	2.79	.01
Societal Location	-2.66	4.22	-0.12	-0.63	.54
Relationship Length	0.04	0.13	0.05	0.27	.79
Academic Adjustment to College	0.08	0.10	0.20	0.86	.40
Social Adjustment to College	0.08	0.08	0.21	0.91	.37
Personal-Emotional Adjustment to College	-0.05	0.14	-0.10	-0.38	.70

*Note:*  $R^2$  for the model is .39.

Table 3

*Regression Analysis Predicting Academic Adjustment to College Among a Sample of First-Year College Students in a Long-Distance Relationship (n = 33).*

<b>Variable</b>	<b><i>b</i></b>	<b><i>SE</i></b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b><i>t</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Hours Talking with Partner in a Day	-0.34	1.27	-0.05	-0.27	.79
Family Approval	10.60	6.53	0.36	1.62	.12
Friends Approval	-8.17	8.87	-0.23	-0.92	.37
Societal Location	4.02	11.39	0.07	0.35	.73
Relationship Length	0.38	0.34	0.23	1.11	.28
Couples Satisfaction Index Score	0.80	0.54	0.32	1.48	.15

*Note:*  $R^2$  for the model is .22.

Table 4

*Regression Analysis Predicting Social Adjustment to College Among a Sample of First-Year*

*College Students in a Long-Distance Relationship (n = 33).*

<b>Variable</b>	<b><i>b</i></b>	<b><i>SE</i></b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b><i>t</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Hours Talking with Partner in a Day	-0.81	1.42	-0.11	-0.57	.57
Family Approval	13.14	7.31	0.40	1.80	.09
Friends Approval	-14.03	9.94	-0.35	-1.41	.17
Societal Location	6.98	12.75	0.11	0.55	.59
Relationship Length	0.34	0.38	0.18	0.90	.38
Couples Satisfaction Index Score	0.92	0.60	0.33	1.52	.14

*Note:*  $R^2$  for the model is .22.

Table 5

*Regression Analysis Predicting Personal-Emotional Adjustment to College Among a Sample of First-Year College Students in a Long-Distance Relationship (n = 33).*

<b>Variable</b>	<b><i>b</i></b>	<b><i>SE</i></b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b><i>t</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Hours Talking with Partner in a Day	-1.27	0.94	-0.26	-1.36	.19
Family Approval	13.45	4.84	0.58	2.78	.01
Friends Approval	-7.59	6.58	-0.28	-1.15	.26
Societal Location	1.98	8.44	0.04	0.24	.82
Relationship Length	0.15	0.25	0.11	0.58	.57
Couples Satisfaction Index Score	0.33	0.40	0.17	0.83	.42

*Note:*  $R^2$  for the model is .29.

Table 6

*Average Scores of College Adjustment for Those Who Remained in Their Long-Distance Relationship and Those Who Did Not Remain in Their Long-Distance Relationship in the First Year of College.*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Percentile		Skewness	<i>n</i>
					25 <sup>th</sup>	75 <sup>th</sup>		
Academic Adjustment								
Stayed Together	148.44	153.50	25.75	84	128.00	166.00	-0.06	18
Broke up	157.63	156.00	24.10	83	147.00	168.00	0.29	8
Social Adjustment								
Stayed Together	128.44	131.50	27.94	115	116.00	145.00	-1.00	18
Broke Up	145.25	145.00	19.88	69	137.00	155.50	-0.26	8
Personal-Emotional Adjustment								
Stayed Together	88.32	77.50	23.88	77	69.00	94.00	0.60	18
Broke Up	91.50	90.00	20.50	58	76.50	108.50	0.06	8
Attachment Adjustment								
Stayed Together	49.78	54.00	10.13	37	49.00	56.00	-1.56	18
Broke Up	53.00	53.00	2.33	7	51.00	54.50	0.45	8
College Adjustment Total								
Stayed Together	402.33	397.00	69.32	289	357.00	442.00	-0.39	18
Broke Up	439.25	439.50	57.22	199	409.50	462.50	0.35	8